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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000404

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ANPP/PDP FUELED VIOLENCE IN KWARA STATE

Classified by DCM T.D. Andrews. Reasons 1.5 (D).

BACKGROUND

1. (U) Kwara state is located on Nigeria's ethnic and religious divide and its divisive politics provide a study of the difficulties facing Nigerian politics in general. Until the Islamic Jihad in the early 19th century, Ilorin, the modern capital of Kwara state, was a part of the Oyo (Yoruba) Empire. With the impending arrival of Usman Danfodio, the Fulani leader whose two goals were to spread Islam and expand the Sokoto Caliphate, a Yoruba leader named Afonja cooperated with the jihadists to wrest the Kwara region from the south. Afonja's expectation of being named as the leader of the region was dashed when the northerners established the Ilorin Emirate and named a Fulani to head it. Pre-existing Yoruba tribal institutions were eliminated and the Ilorin Emirate has been ruled by Fulani since that time.

2. (C) Today's political crisis in Kwara has its roots in that historical dispute. Dr. Abubakar Olusola (Sola) Saraki, physician, banker, former senator, one-time presidential candidate and longtime strongman of Kwara politics, is a product of the Hausa/Fulani emirate system. His primary antagonist, Governor Mohammed Lawal claims descent from Afonja. Lawal, a retired military officer and a protege of Saraki until shortly after his election in 1999, has made serious efforts to revive the Yoruba tribal institutions in the state and is slated to oppose Sola's son, Bukola (Buki), in the 2003 gubernatorial contest. Providing more spice for this conflict is the presence of State Commissioner of Police Mohammed Abubakar. Abubakar was Deputy Commissioner of Police at Lagos' Murtala Mohammed International Airport in 1998 when a bomb blast destroyed the office of the airport's Chief Security Officer. He later made the Abacha-directed announcement that bomb-making materials were found in the office, over the objections of State Commissioner of Police Tsav, who maintained that the claim was false. Coincidentally, Abubakar was also Commissioner of Police for Plateau State during the 2002 ethnic violence that claimed dozens of victims.

POLITICS AND BETRAYAL

3. (SBU) One of the issues behind the conflict is the naming of traditional rulers. Lawal has promoted more than twenty Yoruba traditional rulers, vowing to "return the lost status of the Yoruba." Additionally, court challenges to the nomination of titleholders in the Ilorin Emirate have come from both Lawal and Ilorin Emir Gambari (a Saraki supporter), with each seeking to limit the influence of the other.

4. (C) The fallout between Saraki and Lawal, who won election on the APP (now ANPP) ticket in 1999, has created a seismic shift in Kwara's political landscape. Saraki, along with his son (now the PDP gubernatorial candidate), several National Assembly members and many supporters, joined the ruling PDP. Senator Ahmed Zuruq and five representatives (including Saraki's daughter Gbemisola Saraki-Fowora) stated that "the expulsion of the Kwara ANPP's founding fathers" (Sola) led to a loss of "vision and focus" in Kwara.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE ESCALATES

15. (C) In October 2002, violence attributed to political activities in the state escalated. Candidates of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) were attacked while en route to Ilorin within sight of a police station, and several vehicles were destroyed. According to some witnesses, Police Commissioner Abubakar was present at the scene of the attack and instructed his bodyguards not to interfere.

16. (C) Three weeks later, a bomb destroyed the office's of the Ilorin-based journal "The National Pilot." The paper is owned by Buki Saraki. Abubakar arrested several close associates of Lawal and declared others wanted but said he "could not enter (the Governor's offices) to arrest them." Regardless of the appropriateness of the arrests, most observers believe that the bombing was politically motivated. Three weeks later, Lawal announced that his government had "uncovered a plot to bomb government offices," in a probable to shift speculation from his involvement in the previous attack. In a thinly veiled accusation of Saraki, he said that the plot was "hatched in the home of a prominent politician in Ilorin."

17. (SBU) The latest round of violence set off on February 12, with twelve people attacked around Ilorin. According to one of the victims, his attackers burst into his home in the middle of the night and cut him with machetes "for putting campaign posters of Bukola Saraki on our houses." The Eid al Fitr prayers on February 13 passed peacefully under an intense security presence, but atypically without the presence of either the Governor or Dr. Saraki.

18. (C) Elsewhere in the state on the same day, however, Lawal's motorcade came under attack and one person was reported killed. He immediately blamed Saraki. At the same time, a motorcade of Saraki supporters was attacked en route to Makurdi, capital of Benue state, to attend the launching of President Olusegun Obasanjo's presidential campaign. One supporter was reportedly killed with several others seriously injured. The PDP members involved allege that the attack on their motorcade was carried out on instructions from a personal assistant to one of Lawal's commissioners. According to Bukola Saraki, his group was attacked by the "Governor's convoy," and the killing took place with the Governor present.

19. (U) Other sporadic attacks have been reported in Kwara state. Most incidents apparently start from arguments over the placing of campaign posters of the candidates. The Nigerian habit of pasting campaign posters to highway signs, private property and virtually anything else that doesn't get out of the way tends to invite clashes over turf. At least 46 persons have reportedly been injured in three separate incidents. The clashes have also caused property and vehicular damage in around Ilorin.

110. (U) On the evening of February 19, Bukola claims that armed men entered his Maitama residence in Abuja in an assassination attempt. The four gunmen apparently used a ladder to scale the fence, cut the concertina wire and attempted to gain entrance to the residence. Police at the house discovered the attempt and exchanged gunfire with the suspects who managed to escape. Saraki was not in the house at the time.

COMMENT

111. (C) The political climate in Kwara (and the rest of the nation) continues to heat up. Lawal, a former military man with a widespread reputation for settling his scores by force, and Sola Saraki, his former political mentor who has never backed away from a challenge, seem headed toward further clashes as they and Nigeria's two largest parties fight to win the governorship. The story in Kwara, while unique in its historical antecedents, is similar to the situation in many other states. The move of the Saraki family to the ruling PDP en masse highlights one of the problems of Nigerian politics: loyalty to family and clan are much more important than loyalty to the party. As the scheduled elections approach, local concerns will begin to displace the talk about presidential succession and could heighten the sense of insecurity that is increasing by the day throughout Nigeria.

JETER